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Remarks by The Honorable Sean O'Keefe
NASA Administrator
U.S. Pan Asian American Chamber of Commerce
Excellence Awards & Scholarship Dinner
Washington, D.C.

Thank you Sachi (Sachi Koto, CNN Headline News Anchor) for that very gracious introduction and good evening every one.

I am honored to represent the dedicated men and women of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration tonight at CelebrAsian 2003, this prestigious event presented by the U.S. Pan Asian American Chamber of Commerce.

This Asian-Pacific American Heritage month it is most fitting that we recognize the achievements and contributions of outstanding Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the field of science and technology.

At NASA we are extremely proud of the wonderful contributions made to the achievement of our mission goals by our Asian American and Pacific Islander scientists, engineers and astronauts, four of whom you are about to hear from.

NASA's mission goals are to continue pioneering the future by taking on such objectives as understanding and protecting the home planet, exploring the Universe and searching for life, and inspiring our next generation of explorers.

Building on an extraordinary record of accomplishment, the people of NASA continue to develop revolutionary technologies that are helping us improve aviation safety and efficiency, probe more deeply into the mysteries of the universe with remarkable devices like the Hubble Space Telescope, launch robotic rovers this June to

the surface of Mars to search for past evidence of flowing water on the surface, and work to better understand the dynamics of Earth's climatic system.

Of course our astronauts help conduct much of our most ambitious scientific research on Space Shuttle and Space Station missions in low-earth orbit. And even as we gather the adventure of human spaceflight continues with astronaut Ed Lu and cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko now working some 250 miles over our heads in the first weeks of their five-month Expedition Seven mission onboard the International Space Station.

I suspect that at some future point you may want to honor Ed Lu, who is another of our outstanding Asian-American astronauts. Ed, a veteran of two Shuttle missions, is a solar physicist who has developed a number of new theoretical advances that have provided for the first time a basic understanding of the underlying physics of solar flares.

The astronauts we are honoring in person tonight, Leroy Chiao, Mark Polansky, and Sunita Williams represent the best of the American spirit. And it is most fitting that we also recognize the wonderful legacy of an astronaut hero who we miss more than words can say, Columbia crew member Kalpana Chawla.

It is now my pleasure to introduce each of the astronaut Excellence Award for Science and Technology honorees.

Dr. Leroy Chiao, distinguished alumni of the University of California at Santa Barbara and avid pilot, wrestling coach, piano player, surfer and skier, has flown on three Space Shuttle missions in 1994, 1996 and 2000, the latter being one of our first International Space Station assembly missions.

He has logged a total of 36 days in space, including over 26 extracurricular activity hours in four space walks. Leroy currently serves as our back-up commander for the International Space Station Expedition-8 crew, and will serve as the commander for Expedition 10 when that mission launches, hopefully in the near future.

Leroy has spent much of his professional career helping NASA advance our mission goal of exploring the Universe and searching for life by helping to develop future space telescopes and other scientific devices out of advanced polymer composite materials.

May I invite astronaut and Dr. Leroy Chiao to join me at the podium.

(Following Photo, Dr. Chiao Acknowledged His Award)

O'Keefe:

Our next honoree is Mark Polansky. Mark was the pilot for the STS-98 mission in 2001 onboard the Shuttle Atlantis, logging over 309 hours in space on the flight that delivered the U.S. laboratory module Destiny to the International Space Station. He is assigned as the chief pilot on STS-117, which will be one of our first return-to-flight missions.

Mark is a veteran Air Force pilot who has trained tactical aircrews to defeat enemy aircraft tactics. He is a graduate of Purdue University and a Distinguished Graduate of the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School and enjoys ice hockey and skiing.

May I invite astronaut Mark Polansky to join me at the podium.

(Following Photo, Mark Polansky Acknowledged His Award)

O'Keefe:

Now as a former Navy Secretary, I always enjoy bragging about our Navy veteran astronauts, among whose ranks we are delighted to have in tonight's group of achievers Sunita Williams, or Sunny as she is known in the NASA family.

Sunny graduated from the Naval Academy in 1987, and has logged over 2300 flight hours in more than 30 different aircraft flew helicopters in Operation Desert Storm and Operation Provide Comfort, the effort to protect the Kurds of Northern Iraq from Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War. In 1992 she was the Officer-in-Charge of an H-46 helicopter detachment sent to Miami for Hurricane Andrew Rescue Operations.

As an astronaut Sunny has worked in Moscow with our Russian partners on our cooperative effort to develop the International Space Station, and is a back up crew member for the Expedition 10 mission to the Space Station.

She is also interestingly enough, an aquanaut, who lived for nine days underwater in the joint NASA-National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration Aquarius research station, where we conducted research that will be important to helping us conduct long-duration spaceflights.

Among Sunny's recreational interests are swimming, biking, triathlons, windsurfing, snowboarding and bow hunting. And when she does get her first spaceflight assignment, we'll have to see if she can become the first archer in space.

May I now invite astronaut Sunita Williams to join me at the podium.
(Following Photo, Sunita Williams Acknowledged Her Award)

O'Keefe:

If you will now permit me, I'd like to talk a bit about the courageous members of the Columbia crew and in particular about Kalpana Chawla, the native of Karnal, India and adopted citizen of the United States who inspired both our great countries and the world on two Space Shuttle missions.

This winter, on their 16-day mission, our Columbia astronauts demonstrated once again to all of us that great lives are defined by great purposes. On January 16, we saw our seven astronauts head into space with smiles on their faces, and as their families have so eloquently said with "hearts full of enthusiasm, pride in country, faith in their God, and a willingness to accept risk in the pursuit of knowledge—knowledge that might improve the quality of life for all mankind."

Without a doubt they represented the best of the human spirit.

We learned from them a number of lessons. One was about setting ambitious goals and pursuing noble causes in one's life's work, a lesson that all of tonight's honorees exemplify so well.

We also learned from them a simple but profound lesson about the value of friendship and teamwork. The astronauts joyfully represented a wonderful tapestry of different races, religions and nationalities. Through their genuine love for each other they demonstrated the potential for all of us to work together in harmony.

This spirit was so wonderfully expressed by Kalpana. When she first flew into space in 1997, over a thousand youth ran through the streets of Karnal with signs that read, "Kalpana is our pride and Kalpana is our golden girl." And that she was.

Kalpana told a reporter shortly before Columbia's mission that "We do science, we do experiments, but looking at Earth and appreciating the magnificence of it is easily the most touching thing you come back with." When I joined President Bush in speaking to the nation at the first memorial service held in the astronauts' honor, one image from the mission—of Kalpana standing on the Shuttle's flight deck, joyfully bidding her crewmates to come see the reflection of the entire Earth in the retina of her eye—struck me as the defining image of what this crew was all about.

I said at the time that this is the image that we will remember, and treasure, forever. So it is in that spirit that I am profoundly honored to recognize Kalpana Chawla, an astronaut hero of uncommon vision and grace with your Excellence Award for Science and Technology and ask Sunny to accept the award on her families' behalf.

(Following Photo, Sunita Williams Acknowledged Award for Kalpana Chawla)